

'Microinequities' in the Workplace

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(EDITOR'S NOTE: **Business communications has never been more complicated - Cell phones, video conferencing, e-mails, web content, correspondence, reports and presentations cause even the greatest writer or orator to stir with apprehension that their message is clearly understood. Each month this column will explore the many different ways each of us can learn to communicate more plainly.**)

What's a microinequity? A microinequity is a fancy term for non-verbal communication on a small-scale gone very bad. It's called micro, or small, because it's hardly visible to anyone other than the receiver of the inequity. We all know what an inequity is: something that is not equal or fair. It's usually associated with race, gender, age, religion and sexual orientation. However, anyone can be treated unfairly.

We send 2,000 to 4,000 subtle signals to each other every day in the form of nods, eye contact, head turns and gestures. Some signals are positive and some are negative. These micro gestures can have a big impact on our lives. On a bad day, we can be microdismissed, microjudged or microinsulted. On a good day, we might be micropraised or microappreciated.

Here are a few examples of microinequities in the workplace:

- Have you ever sat in a meeting with a group of people and when a certain person talks, everyone else in the room looks down, crosses their arms, rolls their eyes, and starts doodling instead of taking notes?
- Have you ever witnessed a younger worker (or older worker) whose ideas are repeatedly disregarded because they are "too young" (or "too old") to have any good ideas, even though their ideas really are good from time to time?
- Have you ever encountered an "invisible" staff member that, for whatever reason, is hardly ever spoken to, not invited to lunch, and rarely asked to participate in anything at work?

All of these are subtle ways to discredit another person. It's easy to overlook because it is rarely noticed by anyone other than the person on the receiving end of this behavior. Why does it happen? Competition. Jealousy. Insecurity. Positioning. Power. Indifference. Those are just a few guesses.

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This phenomenon was brought to my attention recently as I read a popular newsstand magazine on this type of non-verbal communication. It jolted me back to the story of someone I knew several years ago at a different job. Brad (not his real name) was new to our office. He left a job he loved, a beautiful office, and a staff that adored him to take a position in our office. He traded all of this for what he thought would be a new and exciting challenge. He was armed with enthusiasm, a jovial personality, a new master's degree, and the promise that he would be making a significant contribution to our office.

I am not sure what happened, but when he arrived for work, his supervisor (who had recruited him), housed him in a very undesirable workspace, wouldn't invite him to meetings, criticized everything he did, and only gave him very simple tasks or no work at all.

This would-be star employee wilted away in his cubicle only to ask himself everyday why he traded a great job for this misery.

Several months later, Brad and I became friends. He told me about his humbling experience. He even told me that he felt like the "invisible guy" at the office and said that days would pass by and no one talked to him---not even a "hello" or a "good morning" from anyone. He became more and more depressed and less and less productive. His self-esteem took a huge hit.

Eventually his supervisor left and he was working for someone else. He absolutely flourished. He was involved in projects and meetings. His opinion was valued. He was encouraged and allowed to make a contribution.

My point is this: If someone is repeatedly put down in the workplace in a subtle way (or even in a not so subtle way), they will eventually start believing the messages that are being sent to them and respond accordingly. The behavior becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. As the for the examples above, the person that is always discredited in a meeting will eventually quit talking; the older or younger worker will eventually quit coming up with new ideas; and the "invisible" employee will just become even more invisible than they already are.

The article that discussed microinequities reminds readers to be aware of the little messages we send to each other that can build people up or tear people down. It is important to realize that subtle messages have a big impact on the well-being of the receiver, overall workplace happiness and organizational culture, and productivity. Valuing each other's differences and treating each other with kindness and respect are just good business practices.